

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA POLICIES OF POLICE  
DEPARTMENTS AND SHERIFFS' OFFICES IN THE STATE OF IDAHO:  
CONGRUENCY TO THE MODEL POLICY

by

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Larry D. Rodgers, who passed away in the early stages of this study. Larry provided me with support and encouragement all throughout my academic career, especially in my college years. He was one of the few people who truly understood my passions, the importance of my degree, and the fact that I am not studying to become a lawyer. Maybe most importantly, Larry showed me the true meaning of faith and a trust in God's plan that will forever inspire me.

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## ABSTRACT

The use of social media as a medium of communication has increased significantly over the past decade, and as such, there is huge potential for reaching a large audience with any information one wishes-positive or negative. Law enforcement is no exception to the social media craze. Agencies across the country have begun to use social media in their departments for public relations activities, and investigations, among other goals. The rapid growth and adoption of social media brings with it the potential for important precautionary steps to be overlooked. Due to this rapid shift in online communication and ever-increasing popularity of social media, there are steps that should be taken by departments before they become involved in an extremely public and interactive form of communication. One important step includes the formation of a social media policy. To this point, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) created a model policy in August 2010 to help guide agencies in the development of their own social media policies. This content analysis examines current social media policies and published social media sites from Idaho police departments and sheriffs' offices to determine the extent of congruency between them and the IACP model policy. Summary recommendations to agencies are provided.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| DEDICATION .....   | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....                                     | v  |
| ABSTRACT .....   | vi |
| LIST OF TABLES .....                                       | ix |
| LIST OF FIGURES .....                                      | x  |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....                                | xi |
| INTRODUCTION .....   | 1  |
| LITERATURE REVIEW .....                                    | 5  |
| Internal and External Police Communications .....          | 5  |
| Social Media Platforms and Their Uses.....                 | 7  |
| Social Media and Law Enforcement Agencies .....            | 12 |
| The Need for an IACP Social Media Model Policy .....       | 16 |
| Summary .....  | 19 |
| RESEARCH DESIGN .....                                      | 20 |
| Concepts and Variables.....                                | 21 |
| Control Variables and Measurement .....                    | 31 |
| Sampling and Data Collection .....                         | 33 |
| FINDINGS .....   | 36 |
| Findings Concerning Content of Facebook Pages .....        | 36 |
| Findings Concerning Content of Social Media Policies ..... | 38 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Bivariate Analysis .....                       | 42 |
| Police Departments vs. Sheriffs' Offices ..... | 42 |
| Agency Size .....                              | 42 |
| Summary of Findings.....                       | 44 |
| DISCUSSION .....                               | 46 |
| Limitations .....                              | 52 |
| Summary Recommendations .....                  | 53 |
| CONCLUSION.....                                | 56 |
| REFERENCES .....                               | 58 |



## LIST OF TABLES

|         |   |    |
|---------|---|----|
| Table 1 | Strategy Variables .....                                      | 23 |
| Table 2 | Procedure Variables .....                                     | 24 |
| Table 3 | Department-Sanctioned Use Variables .....                     | 25 |
| Table 4 | Potential Use Variables .....                                 | 26 |
| Table 5 | Distributions among Facebook Page Sample. ....                | 32 |
| Table 6 | Distributions among Social Media Policy Sample .....          | 32 |
| Table 7 | Results - Facebook Page Analysis .....                        | 37 |
| Table 8 | Results – Social Media Policies Analysis .....                | 39 |
| Table 9 | Significant Facebook Page Variables based on Agency Size..... | 43 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|           |  |    |
|-----------|--|----|
| Figure 1. | Outline of IACP Social Media Policy..... | 22 |
|-----------|--|----|

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |   |
|------|---|
| IACP | International Association of Chiefs of Police |
| BJA  | Bureau of Justice Assistance                  |
| OJP  | Office of Justice Programs                    |
| DOJ  | U.S. Department of Justice                    |
| PIO  | Public Information Officer                    |
| MDT  | Mobile Data Terminal                          |

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2013, the Latah County, Idaho Sheriff's Office posted a photo of a wanted 19-year-old along with a statement, "We have decided that Andrew Cain is no longer the Wanted Person of the Week... he is the Wanted Person of the Month of June. Congratulations!" (Dubrovin, 2013, para. 5) This message was just the beginning of a chain of events that would end with Andrew Cain taking his own life. A sheriff's deputy also was reported to have harassed Cain with private messages, taunting Cain with statements telling him to turn himself in for a copy of the wanted poster (Dubrovin, 2013). The outcome that occurred after this exchange brought into question the use of social media by police agencies in Idaho. The Latah County Sheriff's Office received negative media attention because of this incident and they no longer have a Facebook page or any other social media presence. While the Latah County Sheriff's Office has removed itself completely from the social media sphere, other agencies in the state have embraced this new form of communication that has become such a large part of the public's day-to-day life.

Social media has overtaken our society and culture. The use of this medium of communication has increased significantly in the past decade across the globe. With the explosion of social media in the past few years, multiple platforms have become available, allowing for many different types of uses. Facebook, currently the leading social media site, has 968 million daily active users and 1.49 billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2015). Walaski (2013) identifies six of the most commonly used types of

social media: blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, professional networks, video sharing, and content-driven communities. Each of these platforms allows for a diverse type of communication and interaction to occur.

Law enforcement is no exception to the social media craze. Agencies across the country have begun using social media in their departments for public relations activities or investigations. Lieberman, Koetzle, and Sakiyama (2013) report that, “Currently, over 75% of the 61 largest departments in the United States have a presence on at least one of the three major social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace” (p. 439). The rapid growth and adoption of social media brings with it the potential for important precautionary steps to be overlooked, as was the case in Latah County, Idaho. The use of social media is a new frontier for most agencies involved. A social media presence allows for an all new form of communication between an agency and the public. Due to this rapid shift and popularity of social media, this thesis will examine what steps, if any, have been taken by departments before they became engaged in this extremely public and interactive form of communication.

Due to the hasty evolution and adoption of social media into modern culture, in October 2010, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) partnered with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), Office of Justice Programs (OJP), and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to create the Center for Social Media (IACP, 2010). The IACP’s Center for Social Media serves as a no cost source of information to assist law enforcement personnel in developing and enhancing their use of social media. The Center also conducts an annual social media survey, sent electronically to law enforcement

executives, to gather information on a variety of topics related to agencies' use of social media, including their accompanying social media policies.

In 2010, the IACP found that 35.2% of the surveyed agencies had a social media policy. This number increased in 2014 to 71.7%, and 12.2% were in the process of creating a policy (IACP, 2014). The demand for the creation of sound social media policies has risen along with the popularity of this communication platform. Seeing this vital need, the IACP has devoted a major section of its online resources to policy development and integration of social media policies. The plethora of resources provided by the IACP includes a model social media policy (discussed in the literature review) along with a concepts and issues paper explaining the importance of each individual part of the model policy. By using resources available through the IACP's Center for Social Media, it is likely that Idaho police departments and sheriffs' offices can more easily develop and implement such policies.

The heightened interest in the use of social media by law enforcement across the country, including in Idaho and the accompanying development of relevant policies has led to the main research questions addressed by this study. The main research questions examined in this study are: to what extent do police departments and sheriffs' offices in Idaho adhere to the model social media policy put forth by the IACP, and how well are these policies reflected in the departments' actual social media pages?

Due to the heightened sensitivity that is inherent in the nature of policing, it is imperative that a department has goals and a comprehensive set of policies regarding its use of social media. Answering the questions stated above may help to reveal how Idaho police departments and sheriffs' offices are developing, and adhering to, their social

media policies. A better understanding of police departments' uses of social media can help other departments make the decision whether or not to participate in this growing trend. Also, by answering these questions, we can determine if more training and development are needed on the use of social media. Evaluations of the use of social media in policing can determine if valuable resources should be put towards some other, more beneficial, use. Agencies will benefit from a greater understanding of many issues surrounding the use of social media, including that of the relevant policies that are put in place. This thesis is a first step at determining congruency to the model social media policy among Idaho law enforcement agencies.

This study will be descriptive in nature. The information gained from this study will be used to describe how police departments and sheriffs' offices in Idaho are currently administering and maintaining their social media presence. More specifically, the findings will describe the current social media policies that are in place in Idaho police departments and sheriffs' offices. Studies of this nature are limited due to the fact that social media's use in police agencies is a fairly new endeavor and is still progressing and evolving. The information gained from this descriptive study will bring to light more specific areas in the social media policy arena for further research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Law enforcement communication with the public has developed significantly in recent years. The rise of social media has brought a whole new set of challenges and opportunities to the ever important and complex relationship between the public and the police. Law enforcement agencies are increasing their use of social media, partly to keep up with a more technologically advanced society and partly due to the potential benefits that can be gained from its use (IACP, 2010). Using social media permits agencies to reach a slightly younger audience than other platforms, such as newspapers or community bulletins, may allow.

The potential audience law enforcement agencies can reach with information posted to a social media site is also much larger than any other form of communication. The benefits that can be gained from social media use include the following: allowing departments to build public relations by conveying information about police effectiveness, reporting human-interest stories, soliciting feedback from community members, relaying warnings about dangerous situations in certain jurisdictions, and seeking assistance in solving crimes or locating missing persons (Lieberman et al., 2013). The use of social media also gives law enforcement agencies a controlled voice in what information is released and a way to respond to claims about the department/office.

### **Internal and External Police Communications**

Police communications throughout history have changed to fit the technology and goals being observed at the time. The first established form of non-face-to-face police



communication was that of call boxes in the 1800s (Brown, 2014). These call boxes allowed for officers to communicate with dispatch through a call in procedure and also provided for dispatch to call out to the officers (Stewart, 1994). This type of communication evolved as wireless communication became available in the late 1890s and early 1900s (Brown, 2014). Thus was born the two-way radio.

Wireless communication was especially appealing to policing because of a shift to the use of patrol cars rather than foot patrol. Using a wireless device allowed for dispatch to contact the officers no matter where they were located and vice versa. This technology also permitted for the development of handheld radios issued to officers (Brown, 2014). In addition to two-way radios, Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs) are widely used as a form of communication among police officers and between dispatch and police officers today.

In terms of external communication, police have historically interacted with the media as a form of communicating with the public. At times, the relationship between the police and members of the media is somewhat strained by multiple factors outlined by Caeti, Liederbach, and Bellew (2004). These factors include the following: conflicts and disagreements related to the First Amendment right to free speech; occupational factors, such as differences in perception of events and pre-existing distinctions in personalities between law enforcement and members of the media; and mutual distrust fueled by historical events such as the social and political turmoil of the 1960s (Caeti et al., 2004). Further, Chermak and Weiss (2005) conducted a study examining the police-media relationship and found that PIOs believe the news media spends too much time covering crime and police, but that this coverage provides a valuable platform for police organizations to communicate with the public. Both police and media personnel indicated

that they perceived a good relationship with *most* police organizations (Chermak & Weiss, 2004). News media provided the most direct communication line between the police and the public until the rise of social media (Chermak & Weiss, 2004). Police now can directly communicate and interact with the public through the use of social media, granting for more control of the messages and interactions.

Each time a new communication technology has been discovered and implemented, it has taken time to determine what exactly this new technology could mean for generally improving police effectiveness. The use of social media as a form of communication by police agencies seems to possibly still be in this phase. Social media provides a unique challenge in that it is constantly changing based on user wants and demands. Policies may not be fully in place to protect against the potential dangers of this form of communication, or to provide guidelines on how to use it. The exact and most beneficial use of social media for communication by police agencies may not yet be known. There are certainly many new factors to consider, including how each social media platform differs and how an agency can best use social media.

### **Social Media Platforms and Their Uses**

Social media provides an interactive environment for the community to engage directly with a department. Little is known about how exactly law enforcement agencies are using social media, how they are managing the use of social media from within, and the potential risks and issues that can arise out of its use. The term “social media” encompasses a large breadth of platforms, each of which provides something different that should be considered before any department/office use. The communication and interaction level in each platform varies, providing different benefits and drawbacks to

users. The term “blog” is short for weblog and is an electronic chronicle of information that is updated in some regular fashion (Walaski, 2013). Blogs provide a more free-form dialogue and they are usually used to communicate information or opinions in conversational, paragraph form. Microblogs evolved out of this concept and differ from blogs in that they provide a word or character limit on the size of the blog. Twitter is the most popular form of microblog and only allows 140 characters in each message. Microblogs also encourage more interaction in that other members can quickly and easily respond to messages or repost them to their own account (Walaski, 2013).

Social networking sites provide much more interaction than both blogs and microblogs (Walaski, 2013). For example, Facebook users are encouraged to interact in a variety of different ways including through comments and the original “like” button, and the “love”, “haha”, “wow”, “sad”, and “angry” buttons. Users commonly share stories, news articles, or links to external websites to their timelines, which are then visible to their friends and potentially, other audiences. Almost any information in any format can be shared onto Facebook and then comments may be posted by anyone. Interaction can occur among friends or among strangers. Facebook is generally focused on being a social site, but recently, additional features have been added to encourage even more use. Facebook has introduced business-oriented pages, which allow for organizations to use Facebook as a mechanism for marketing by providing tools such as payment for promotion.

Professional networks are similar to social networking sites. LinkedIn is the most popular site of this type and provides users with professional networking opportunities (Walaski, 2013). Comer (2011) claims that LinkedIn provides five different strategic uses

to businesses, including the following: building relationships through short notes and reviewing activity, understanding prospective clients and identifying their interests, seeking out clients who fit the target market and/or meeting them through existing contacts, projecting a consistent and positive image of the business, and listening to clients to learn their concerns and views of the business. The format of LinkedIn lends itself to be more of a one-on-one relationship building tool between professionals (Walaski, 2013). Any correspondence that occurs on the site is between individual users and each message must be sent separately. LinkedIn provides users a way to build and maintain a professional identity that can be accessed and viewed by potential employers.

The next type of social media identified by Walaski (2013) is video sharing. Currently, the most popular video sharing website is YouTube. This site originally was used solely for personal videos, but in recent years more organizations and groups have begun to use YouTube as a business tool (Walaski, 2013).. YouTube encourages its users to create an account to which they can upload their videos. There are no limitations on the length or content that can be included in the videos, except they must not be illegal in nature or source. Other users can then subscribe to channels they enjoy and are notified when a new video is uploaded to that channel. Users can also like or dislike videos and counts of these likes or dislikes are kept directly below the video. YouTube provides a convenient share button that allows users to distribute a video they like onto multiple other social media sites. YouTube offers the environment for a video to go “viral”, meaning that it is circulated rapidly and widely.

The final type of social media identified by Walaski (2013) is content-driven communities. These sites do not provide interaction as the previously mentioned types of

social media do, but rather offer a platform to share content. Wikipedia is the most popular of this type of social media site. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that can be edited by users. The fact that users can edit and share any material they want to has the potential to make the site much less reliable than an actual encyclopedia and has been the cause for some criticism, but it also provides potential for fact-checking. The format offers room for collaborative effort for discovering information and defining terms (Walaski, 2013). While the information found on Wikipedia may not always be completely accurate, it does provide an open forum for information sharing and can bring together multiple authors to create a more comprehensive view of a topic (Walaski, 2013).

Different social media platforms are used by people and organizations for diverse types of information. Kim, Sin, and Tsai (2014) found that most social media platforms were used as general information sources. More specifically, Kim et al. (2014) discovered that wikis were used most often for background information; media-sharing sites were used to find solutions; and news, microblogs, and social networking sites were used for getting updates and news. It is important to note the study was limited to a college-student population; thus, it cannot be generalized to a larger population.

Mitchell, Holcomb, and Page (2013) completed a broader study on the use of social media platforms, but they only examined which platforms were being used to engage with news. Mitchell et al. (2013) found that Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook were the three sites used most often by users to keep up with news. Facebook had, by far, the largest reach to the general population. For example, 64% of U.S. adults use the site,

and half of those use it as a news source, amounting to approximately 30% of the general population using Facebook as their main news source (Mitchell et al., 2013).

Due to the vast and diverse forms of communication social media provides, users need to first identify their goal in using social media. After this goal is established, a user will be able to better choose which platform, or combination of platforms, to engage in and put resources towards. Also, some platforms may require more maintenance than others. For example, microblogs (such as Twitter) only grant space for a small burst of information to be posted at one time and require less time to complete, whereas a social networking site (i.e. Facebook) allows for any size of post, encourages many different types of interactions (e.g. likes, comments, and shares), and requires more time to assure goals are being met. It is also important to note that different platforms are popular with different audiences; therefore, knowing the audience is another important aspect of using social media and achieving any goals set forth. Walaski (2014) points out that an organization must know its audience and its expectations of content to ensure it can meet these expectations, so the organization can reinforce a positive relationship with the audience. As with any consumer/business relationship, the organization must keep its consumers' wants and needs at the forefront if it wishes to continue a successful business.

Previous studies have been conducted examining the benefits of small or medium sized businesses using social media as a marketing strategy. Nobre and Silva's (2014) study suggested that small or medium sized businesses can benefit from the impact of word of mouth generated on social networks, but these networks must be carefully monitored to assure negative communications are promptly addressed. They also found that the relationships formed through social media lead to more involvement between

customers and the firms (Nobre & Silva, 2014). Facebook provides a fairly cheap form of advertisement and facilitates and promotes direct customer/business relationships for small to medium size companies. Nobre and Silva (2014) point out that businesses wanting to use Facebook in their marketing strategy must have “focus, a well-developed Facebook plan, an understanding of analytics, and the courage to engage the consumer in a meaningful, open manner” (p. 149). Though this study provides some interesting information, it should be noted that the sample only included four separate companies; therefore, the study should only be used as a starting point for research on small and medium size businesses’ use of social media in marketing.

While a public service organization such as a police department or sheriff’s office may not be traditionally thought of as participating in “marketing”, there are similarities between these tactics and those used by policing agencies for communication with the public. Social media provides a plethora of options and customizable features that make it a valuable medium for any agency. For example, Facebook delivers a cost effective way for police organizations to interact with a larger audience than could be reached otherwise. In fact, the format of social media actually encourages interaction between the business (in this case, the agency) and the public as a whole (Nobre & Silva, 2014).

### **Social Media and Law Enforcement Agencies**

Police departments have increasingly jumped into the world of social media. This is a new and quickly evolving aspect of policing seen across the United States (IACP, 2010). The IACP, in partnership with the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), Office of Justice Programs (OJP), and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), created the Center for Social Media in October of 2010. The goal of this initiative, as stated on its website, is

“to build the capacity of law enforcement to use social media to prevent and solve crimes, strengthen police-community relations, and enhance services” (IACP, 2015, para. 1). The IACP Center for Social Media conducts yearly electronic surveys sent to law enforcement executives, focusing on law enforcement agencies’ use of social media. Their most recent survey (N=553) conducted in the fall of 2015, found that 73.9% of agencies not currently using social media were considering its adoption (IACP, 2015). Ninety-six percent (n=533) of the agencies surveyed use social media; the most common use reported was for criminal investigations at 88.7 percent. The most frequently used social media platforms used by the law enforcement agencies are Facebook (94.2%), Twitter (71.2%), and YouTube (40.0%). Almost 77.8% of agencies surveyed have a social media policy and 11.7% were in the process of crafting a policy at the time they completed the survey (IACP, 2015).

While not a national study on social media, Kabrud (2015) examined the use of social media by law enforcement agencies in the state of Idaho. This study focused specifically on examining the information disseminated through Facebook pages utilized by Idaho law enforcement agencies over a three-month period, June through August 2013. Kabrud (2015) found that the majority (47.02%) of Facebook posts were devoted to public relations information, more specifically, community interest (43.17%). The second most common use of Facebook pages by law enforcement agencies in Idaho was for crime-related posts (17.04%) followed by alert-related posts (16.57%; Kabrud, 2015). This study shows that agencies in Idaho are using Facebook to actively engage with the public on a day-to-day basis, but are there policies in these same agencies that guide the use of social media?



The rapid growth and popularity of social media makes one wonder what steps were taken by departments/offices before they interact with the community in this extremely public and interactive platform of communication. There are many privacy and security concerns an agency may have before becoming involved with social media. Jennings, Blount, and Weatherly (2014) argue that, “it only takes one ill-worded or ill-timed post to create a company nightmare” (p. 102). Even if one person is in charge of the official posts of an organization, this is not enough protection because even a well-meaning employee can create a post with devastating effects (Jennings et al., 2014). The potential harms that may arise from social media require any organization planning to use social media to create written policies related to its use. Due to the heightened sensitivity that is inherent in the nature of policing, it is imperative that an agency has some sort of goal and a comprehensive set of policies regarding the agency’s use of social media. As seen in the IACP 2014 survey results, not all of the agencies using social media have a policy or are even in the process of drafting a policy. The importance of such a policy may not yet be fully realized.

After policies and goals are in place, social media can be an effective communication instrument for law enforcement agencies. Bain, Robinson, and Conser (2014) argue that social media is an important tool that can be used by police departments to reach a younger generation who may not be as interested in the more traditional community relation activities, such as local meetings and community groups. Engaging different age groups is extremely important to create a healthy relationship with the community. Reaching various audiences should be considered a priority, especially because law enforcement agencies have such a wide consumer pool. Their consumer

strategy must be kept vague enough to attract multiple groups of people, including the younger generation that insists on quick and easy access to information. Bain et al. (2014) claim that social media provides a quick and efficient way to distribute information to an audience and receive feedback. The feedback needs to be monitored in order to provide any benefit, but if an agency takes advantage of this feature, the feedback can be very useful in fostering a cohesive relationship with the community. The feedback loop that takes place between an agency and the community they serve is valuable to everyone involved in that it is an open line of communication for both parties. The goals of an organization's use of social media will determine what type of relationship should be fostered.

Brainard and McNutt (2010) tried to identify what types of relationships were being cultivated in a specific police department's use of social media. They sought to determine if the relationship was informational, transactional, or collaborative. In their limited sample of the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Police Department's seven police districts, Brainard and McNutt (2010) found that, "Much of what occurs in these discussion groups exemplifies information provision and announcements. Some of what occurs exemplifies transaction and exchange. Very little in our results suggests collaborative problem solving" (p. 852). While these results certainly cannot be generalized to all agencies' use of social media, it can be helpful in identifying the different types of interactions seen between law enforcement agencies and the public through social media. In this case, the department wanted social media to further community policing efforts by encouraging collaborative forces, yet the study found that this was not happening (Brainard & McNutt, 2010). Brainard and McNutt's (2010)

research also showed that when these collaborative efforts were put forth by police, the public reacted positively and problem solving did occur. This serves to show the importance of setting clear goals for social media and following up to ensure these goals are met. Proper training for police personnel involved in the use and maintenance of social media sites needs to be implemented in order for the goals to be recognized and achieved (IACP, 2010).

The literature on perceptions of law enforcement's use of social media is scant. Spitzman and Miller (2013) examined university students' perceptions of law enforcement's use of social media (N=155). In this exploratory study, Spitzman and Miller (2013) found general support for law enforcement operating social media. More specific information was gathered on what types of uses the students considered appropriate for policing agencies. The practices surrounding community involvement, such as posting information about a missing girl in the hopes of getting tips, gained much more support than law enforcement using software to actively seek out criminals with no community help. The students also indicated that transparency was important. They wanted to receive as much information as possible; less information was sometimes associated with deceitfulness. Spitzman and Miller (2013) conclude that future social media policies in law enforcement should contain a section addressing the importance of police image in online environments.

### **The Need for an IACP Social Media Model Policy**

Misuse of social media can be detrimental to a department (IACP, 2010). Acknowledging the possibly severe consequences from social media misuse, the IACP provides a resource to departments in the creation of a social media model policy. Along

with the policy itself, the IACP released a paper discussing background material and supporting documentation for the model policy and its elements. For example, the IACP defines social media as “a category of Internet-based resources that integrate user-generated content and user participation” (IACP, 2010, p. 1). Social media as a new medium for communication can be effectively used by agencies that take the time to integrate a well-articulated policy. The IACP created a model to help guide departments in creating a policy that covers both official department and individual employee social media use. The duality of the policy is something that the IACP considers essential because of the potential benefits and challenges that come with the use of social media both as a business and on a personal level (IACP, 2010).

Departments can find much value in using social media if it is handled appropriately and effectively. The uses outlined by the IACP (2010) include the following: investigations, community outreach and information, and recruitment and employment. As was mentioned earlier, the most common use of social media by law enforcement is for criminal investigations (IACP, 2014). A range of crimes can be investigated by means of social media, ranging from cybercrime to gang participation (IACP, 2010). Community outreach can occur in the form of greater transparency, collaborative crime solving, and by policing agencies using social media as a vehicle to encourage and even open up communication between the department and the public (IACP, 2010). Many departments have also relied on social media to reach a greater pool of police applicants and as a way to provide information about the department and the hiring process to potential employees (IACP, 2010). All of these social media functions can be valuable, but an agency must also consider important authorization and

administration details before simply allowing employees to create and access an account for the benefit of the agency. The IACP (2010) recommends having the agency's public information officer (PIO) as the authority to oversee and confirm decisions in regard to the department's social media pages. The PIO should have authority over an agency's social media presence because the PIO has the training and knowledge needed in order to make important decisions regarding what and how much information should be shared with the public through social media pages (IACP, 2010).

Departments must consider employees' use of social media sites. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects free speech, but does not protect employees' statements that are made in an official capacity. This was solidified in the 2006 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Garcetti V. Ceballos* in which it was determined that when public employees make statements pursuant to their official responsibilities, they are not speaking as citizens, and thus, are not afforded First Amendment rights. Statements not made in an official capacity are sometimes hard to decipher and the context of the statement matters. If an employee's speech is discovered to be significantly harmful to the department and/or its mission, the department is allowed to take action to prevent further harm (IACP, 2010). Instances that can produce this harm are outlined by the IACP (2010) as the following: revelation of sensitive information; sexually explicit communications; defamatory material; communications derogatory of, or offensive to, protected classes of individuals; and any social media communication that may lead to impeachment of police witnesses. The IACP (2010) also cautions agencies to be cognizant of state and local caveats to laws that may present challenges for social media content and to include these in the policy. Another important personal use issue stressed

by the IACP is the education of the use of social media. The IACP (2010) suggests that it is essential to provide education to both new and seasoned personnel on the proper and improper use of social media, and that training mechanisms should be put in place to assure proper training and use.

### **Summary**

Social media is a continually evolving field that provides a unique platform for interactions with the public along with unique challenges that must be tackled by any agency that wishes to utilize it. The expanding field of social media holds a wealth of opportunity for policing agencies, as long as it is being operated safely and efficiently (IACP, 2010). This only can be accomplished if the proper steps are taken by each department to create a comprehensive and well thought-out social media policy. The IACP has completed the groundwork and developed a model policy consisting of elements that were well researched and developed in such a way that they can be applied to departments across the country (IACP, 2010). It would be expected that Idaho agencies would be applying social media policies that contain these elements as well. Kabrud's (2015) study suggested that agencies across Idaho, at various levels and sizes, are currently utilizing social media. The need for such policies in the state of Idaho is clear given the series of events that took place in Latah County, Idaho described earlier. This study is designed to further our understanding of policies that are in place in Idaho and identify successful practices and areas with potential for growth.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Research on social media and policing is limited, and many unanswered questions remain. Some of these questions include the following: What are the main goals of agencies using social media? The research to date shows that there is potential to reach a younger audience with these tools, but is that audience being reached? And if it is, are social media goals being met? What platform is reaching what audience and how is this information affecting the audience? The available research seems to point to the building of positive relationships, but this research is very limited in its scope (Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Kabrud, 2015). There is still quite a bit to be learned about how effective the use of social media is on improving police-community relations. The potential benefits of social media use is great, but should be tackled in a somewhat cautious manner. For example, are agencies taking the appropriate precautionary measures before utilizing social media, or are agencies becoming involved with something they do not fully understand? Is proper training in place to assure agency security? This rapidly evolving field requires more research in order to provide meaningful results to law enforcement agencies currently using, or planning to use, social media.

While the potential questions are numerous, this research will examine the maintenance and administration of police and sheriffs' offices social media pages in Idaho. This exploratory, descriptive study uses two content analyses to gain more knowledge on the current state of social media use by police agencies, at all levels, in the state of Idaho.

The main questions examined in this study are: (1) How well is the IACP model social media policy being reflected in Idaho agencies' social media pages? (2) To what extent do police departments and sheriffs' offices policies in Idaho adhere to the model social media policy as articulated by the IACP? Answers to these research questions can help us better understand the parameters under which social media is being used in Idaho law enforcement agencies.

### **Concepts and Variables**

The variables for this analysis are found within Section IV (On-The-Job Use) of the social media model policy set forth by the IACP. The model policy identifies five major sections including the following: Purpose, Policy, Definitions, On-The-Job Use, and Personal Use (see Figure 1). This study measures specific elements of the On-The-Job Use section of the model policy and measures these variables by examining the content of policies and social media pages of agencies in the sample. Each agency was asked to provide its social media policy, if any. Tables 1-3 show each variable and how it was measured. The variables were examined in either the actual policy, if it was provided, or on the department pages themselves. Each variable was measured dichotomously, either present or not. Table 4 shows the variables that can only be examined through the current department policies. For the departments whose social media policies were collected, these additional variables were checked against the current department policy.



## Outline of IACP Social Media Model Policy

### I. Purpose

### II. Policy

### III. Definitions

### IV. On-The-Job Use

#### A. Department-Sanctioned Purpose

##### 1. Determine Strategy

- a. Introduction statement
- b. Link to department's webpage
- c. Target audience

##### 2. Procedures

- a. Approved by chief or executive
- b. Indicate maintained by department
- c. Adhere to laws, regulations, and policies
- d. State that opinions do not reflect department's

##### 3. Department-Sanctioned Use

- a. Department personnel conduct
- b. Use of department computers to access social media
- c. Department personnel use of personal devices to access
- d. Copyright, trademark, and service mark abidance

#### B. Potential Uses

- 1. Investigative tool
- 2. Community outreach
- 3. Time-sensitive notifications
- 4. Recruitment
- 5. Background investigations of candidates
- 6. Searches by nondecision maker
- 7. Search personnel deemed as sensitive position.
- 8. Legal search methods
- 9. Vetting techniques
- 10. Validation of internet information

### V. Personal Use

#### A. Precautions and Prohibitions

**Figure 1. Outline of IACP Social Media Policy**

**Table 1      Strategy Variables**

| <b>Strategy Variables</b>  | <b>Operationalization</b> |                      |
|--|---------------------------|----------------------|
|  | <i>Policy</i>             | <i>Facebook Page</i> |
| Introduction statement on page specifying purpose                | X                         | X                    |
| Link to department website                                       | X                         | X                    |
| Designed for target audience such as youth or potential recruits | X                         |                      |

**Table 2      Procedure Variables**

| <b>Procedure Variables</b>   | <b>Operationalization</b> |                      |
|--|---------------------------|----------------------|
|  | <i>Policy</i>             | <i>Facebook Page</i> |
| Pages approved by chief or executive   | X                         |                      |
| Pages administered by the department information services section                                    | X                         | X                    |
| Pages indicate they are maintained by the department   | X                         | X                    |
| Department contact information is prominently displayed  | X                         | X                    |
| Content adheres to applicable laws, regulations, and policies  | X                         | X                    |
| Subject to public records laws   | X                         |                      |
| Content managed, stored, and retrieved to comply with open records laws                              | X                         |                      |
| State that opinions expressed by visitors to the pages do not reflect the opinions of the department | X                         | X                    |
| Indicate that posted comments will be monitored and can be removed                                   | X                         | X                    |
| Indicate that any content posted is subject to public disclosure                                     | X                         | X                    |

**Table 3      Department-Sanctioned Use Variables**

| <b>Department-Sanctioned<br/>Use Variables</b>   | <b>Operationalization</b> |                      |
|--|---------------------------|----------------------|
|  | <i>Policy</i>             | <i>Facebook Page</i> |
| Department personnel conduct   | X                         |                      |
| Department Personnel<br>Identified as members of the department  | X                         |                      |
| Department Personnel –<br>No guilt or innocence statements   | X                         |                      |
| Department Personnel –<br>No comments on pending cases   | X                         |                      |
| Department Personnel –<br>No confidential information including<br>photographs or videos without<br>written permission       | X                         |                      |
| Department Personnel –<br>No political activities or private business  | X                         |                      |
| Use of department computers to access<br>social media without permission is<br>prohibited                                    | X                         |                      |
| Personnel use of personally owned devices<br>to manage department's social media is<br>prohibited without written permission | X                         |                      |
| Observation and abidance of all trademark,<br>copyright, and service mark restrictions                                       | X                         | X                    |

**Table 4      Potential Use Variables**

| <b>Potential Use Variables</b>   | <b>Operationalization</b> |                      |
|--|---------------------------|----------------------|
|  | <i>Policy</i>             | <i>Facebook Page</i> |
| Social Media used as an investigative tool   | X                         |                      |
| Social media used for community outreach and engagement  | X                         |                      |
| Social media used to make time-sensitive notifications   | X                         |                      |
| Social Media used for recruitment  | X                         |                      |
| Department obligation to include Internet-based content in background investigations           | X                         |                      |
| Searches of internet in hiring shall be conducted by a non-decision maker                      | X                         |                      |
| Protected class information shall be filtered out of background information                    | X                         |                      |
| Persons authorized to search Internet-based content are deemed as holding a sensitive position | X                         |                      |
| Search methods cannot violate existing law   | X                         |                      |
| Vetting techniques shall be applied uniformly  | X                         |                      |
| Every effort must be made to validate Internet-based information in hiring process             | X                         |                      |

The On-The-Job Use segment of the model policy is further divided into two sections: Department-Sanctioned presence and Potential Uses. The first set of variables falls under the department sanctioned presence strategy section (Table 1). These variables are used to outline the strategy of the department regarding the layout and essential components of the department's social media pages. The strategy variables as stated in the IACP model policy (2010) include the following:

- *Introductory statement* - Where possible, each social media page shall include an introductory statement that clearly specifies the purpose and scope of the agency's presence on the website.
- *Link to department website* - Where possible, the page(s) should link to the department's official website.
- *Designed for target audience such as youth or potential recruits* - Social media page(s) shall be designed for the target audience(s) such as youth or potential police recruits.

The next section that falls under the department sanctioned presence is the procedures section (Table 2). This section outlines the specific actions and measures that the model policy suggests should be followed regarding the department's use of social media sites. The procedure variables as stated in the IACP model policy (2010) include the following:

- *Pages approved by chief or executive* - All department social media sites or pages shall be approved by the chief executive or his or her designee and shall be

administered by the departmental information services section or as otherwise determined.

- *Pages should be administered by the department information services section -*  
and shall be administered by the departmental information services section or as otherwise determined.
- *Pages indicate they are maintained by the department -* Where possible, social media pages shall clearly indicate they are maintained by the department.
- *Department contact information is prominently displayed.*
- *Content adheres to applicable laws, regulations, and policies -* including all information technology and records management policies.
- *Content subject to public records laws –* and relevant records retention schedules apply to social media content.
- *Content managed, stored, and retrieved to comply with open records laws -*  
Content must be managed, stored, and retrieved to comply with open records laws and e-discovery laws and policies.
- *Site states that opinions expressed by visitors to the pages do not reflect the opinions of the department.*
- *Site should indicate that posted comments will be monitored and can be removed*  
- Pages shall clearly indicate that posted comments will be monitored and that the department reserves the right to remove obscenities, off-topic comments, and personal attacks.

- *Site should indicate that any content posted is subject to public disclosure -*

Pages shall clearly indicate that any content posted or submitted for posting is subject to public disclosure.

The final variables included in the department-sanctioned presence section, as stated in the IACP model policy (2010), are the department-sanctioned use variables (Table 3). These variables identify more specific actions that should be taken by individuals in the department and include the following:

- *Department personnel conduct* - Department personnel representing the department via social media outlets shall do the following: (1) Conduct themselves at all times as representatives of the department and, accordingly, shall adhere to all department standards of conduct and observe conventionally accepted protocols and proper decorum.
- *Department personnel shall be identified as members of the department.*
- *Department personnel shall not make statements of guilt or innocence statements.*
- *Department personnel shall make no comments on pending cases.*
- *Department personnel shall not reveal confidential information including photographs or videos without written permission - nor post, transmit, or otherwise disseminate confidential information, including photographs or videos, related to department training, activities, or work-related assignments without express written permission.*
- *Department personnel shall not conduct political activities or private business.*



- *Use of department computers to access social media without permission is prohibited* - The use of department computers by department personnel to access social media is prohibited without authorization.
- *Personnel use of personally owned devices to manage department's social media is prohibited without written permission* – Department personnel use of personally owned devices to manage the department's social media activities or in the course of official duties is prohibited without express written permission.
- *Observation and abidance of all trademark, copyright, and service mark restrictions* - Employees shall observe and abide by all copyright, trademark, and service mark restrictions in posting materials to electronic media.

The second section of the On-The-Job Use segment is the Potential Uses section (Table 4). This section outlines potential ways the department can utilize social media to achieve specific department goals. The variables in this section include the following:

- *Social Media used as an investigative tool* - Social media is a valuable investigative tool when seeking evidence or information about a. missing persons; b. wanted persons; c. gang participation; d. crimes perpetrated online (i.e., cyberbullying, cyberstalking); and e. photos or videos of a crime posted by a participant or observer.
- *Social media used for community outreach and engagement* - Social media can be used for community outreach and engagement by a. providing crime prevention tips; b. offering online-reporting opportunities; c. sharing crime maps and data; and d. soliciting tips about unsolved crimes (i.e., Crimestoppers, text-a-tip).

- *Social media used to make time-sensitive notifications* - Social media can be used to make time-sensitive notifications related to a. road closures, b. special events, c. weather emergencies, and d. missing or endangered persons.
- *Social Media used for recruitment* - Persons seeking employment and volunteer positions use the Internet to search for opportunities, and social media can be a valuable recruitment mechanism.
- *Department has an obligation to include internet-based content in background investigations.*
- *Searches of internet in hiring shall be conducted by a non-decision maker.*
- *Protected class information shall be filtered out of background information* - Information pertaining to protected classes shall be filtered out prior to sharing any information found online with decision makers.
- *Persons authorized to search Internet-based content are deemed as holding a sensitive position.*
- *Search methods cannot violate existing law* - Search methods shall not involve techniques that are a violation of existing law.
- *Vetting techniques shall be applied uniformly to all candidates.*
- *Every effort must be made to validate Internet-based information in hiring process.*

### **Control Variables and Measurement**

Level of government was used as a control variable in this study. As such, the sample was simply divided into two categories; police departments and sheriffs' offices.

The distribution of the sample for the Facebook Page content analysis can be found in Table 5 and the distribution for the Social Media Policy Sample in Table 6.

The size of the agency may affect the amount of resources that can be put towards the use of social media. Agencies were separated into three different size categories based on the number of sworn officers: small (<25), medium (25-75) and large (76+; see Tables 5 and 6). This categorization method was used by Kabrud (2015), who conducted a similar study on law enforcement agency use of Facebook in the state of Idaho. The number of sworn officers for each agency was found in the most recent, digital copy of Crime in Idaho (2014) on the Idaho State Police's website.

**Table 5      Distributions among Facebook Page Sample.<sup>1</sup>**

| <b>Agency Size</b> | <b>Police Department</b> | <b>Sheriff's Office</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Small              | 22                       | 34                      | 56           |
| Medium             | 10                       | 5                       | 15           |
| Large              | 5                        | 3                       | 8            |
| <b>Total</b>       | 30                       | 49                      | 79           |

**Table 6      Distributions among Social Media Policy Sample**

| <b>Agency Size</b> | <b>Police Department</b> | <b>Sheriff's Office</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| Small              | 5                        | 8                       | 13           |
| Medium             | 4                        | 2                       | 6            |
| Large              | 2                        | 1                       | 3            |
| <b>Total</b>       | 11                       | 11                      | 22           |

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<sup>1</sup> Agency employment of a PIO was originally proposed as a third control variable. This variable was removed due to the small number of agencies in Idaho where such a position exists.

The unit of analysis for this study is individual local and county level law enforcement agencies in the state of Idaho. A representative from each unit was contacted via e-mail with a request for the agency's social media policy (if one existed). In addition, each unit's Facebook page was examined for content based on the IACP's Model Social Media Policy. A chi square analysis was run for each variable compared to both agency size and level of government in order to find how likely it is that the observed distribution is due to chance. Chi square tests were used because both sets of variables are categorical.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

A list of all police departments and sheriffs' offices in the state of Idaho was obtained from the Idaho Statistical Analysis Center. A Facebook search was conducted for each of the 119 agencies in Idaho. The agencies' Facebook pages were then analyzed to check for the applicable variables (See Tables 1, 2, and 3). Agencies that did not have a Facebook page were not included in this half of the study. Facebook was chosen as the type of social media to analyze due to its overwhelming popularity as the social media medium of choice, as noted in the literature review. A total of 79 pages, consisting of 30 county level agencies and 49 local police agencies were found and are included in the analysis. These pages were located through a search on Facebook that took place January 11, 2016 through January 20, 2016. The pages were examined for the variables marked in the Pages column in Tables 1, 2, and 3. These variables were considered dichotomous and were recorded as either present or not (yes or no). The front page of each Facebook

site and the “About” tab were the two main sources on which the variables were found for each agency’s page.

For the second content analysis of social media policies, all 119 agencies were contacted via email and asked to submit their social media policies. Emails were sent through the Idaho Chiefs of Police Association and the Idaho Sheriffs’ Association. Agencies that were not members of either association were contacted directly by the researcher (n=11). The first request for social media policies was sent out between November 14 and November 17, 2015. A follow-up email was sent out between December 1 and December 10, 2015. All of the variables listed in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 were included in the content analysis of the social media policies. Twenty-two agencies responded by either sending in their policies, or simply stating they did not currently have a social media policy in place at that time. A total of 20 policies were received and included in this analysis.

This study was developed as a first step, descriptive analysis in an area with scant empirical research. Although previous research is lacking, there are a few credible resources from which this study takes its method (IACP, 2014; Kabrud, 2015). The elements analyzed in the content analysis are based on information gained from the IACP’s model social media policy and the IACP’s concepts and issues paper on social media (IACP, 2010). This content analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the current social media policies in use by Idaho police departments and sheriffs’ offices, and may also show the current deficiencies or strengths in the policy. As such, the use of content analysis of both the policies and social media pages is constructed as an

unobtrusive form of research that allows for a greater understanding of the use of social media policies, while also keeping research costs low.

## FINDINGS

The main questions examined in this study are: (1) To what extent is the IACP model social media policy reflected in Idaho agencies' social media pages? (2) To what extent do police departments and sheriffs' offices policies in Idaho adhere to the model social media policy as articulated by the IACP?

### **Findings Concerning Content of Facebook Pages**

The content analysis of agencies' Facebook pages found that a few of the IACP variables were present, but a majority of the variables were missing. The two variables that were found in most Facebook pages were a link to the department or city website (n=67, 84.81%) and contact information in the form of a phone number (n=76, 96.20%). While a mission statement is not something included in the IACP model policy, 50 agencies (63.29%) included their departments' mission statement on their Facebook pages located under the "About" tab. The rest of the variables were found on very few of the 79 pages included in the analysis. Fourteen pages (17.72%) indicated they were maintained by the department and 13 (16.46%) stated that posts by visitors to the Facebook page would be monitored and may be removed by the department if deemed necessary. Eleven pages (13.92%) stated that content posted on the page must adhere to relevant policies, procedures, and laws and 11 pages stated that all posts were subject to public disclosure.

Surprisingly, only 8 pages (10.13%) stated that any opinions expressed by visitors were not a reflection of the department's opinions. Only 7 pages (8.76%) included an

introduction statement stating the purpose of the Facebook page, and only 6 pages (7.59%) stated that they were administered by the department itself. Four of the pages were considered “verified” by Facebook.<sup>2</sup> Verification by Facebook will be further discussed in both the discussion and recommendations sections. It should be noted that verification is not a variable that was included in the model policy.

**Table 7      Results - Facebook Page Analysis**

| <b>Variable</b>  | <b>Number of Facebook Pages that include Variable</b> |
|--|---|
| Department Contact Information                         | 76 (96.20%)   |
| Link to Department Website                             | 67 (84.81%)   |
| Mission Statement*                                     | 50 (63.29%)   |
| Posts will be monitored and can be removed             | 14 (17.72%)   |
| Indicate the page is Maintained by Department          | 13 (16.46%)   |
| Content must Adhere to Policies, Laws, and Regulations | 11 (13.92%)   |
| Content is Subject to Public Disclosure                | 11 (13.92%)   |
| Visitor Opinions do not Reflect Department's           | 8 (10.13%)  |

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<sup>2</sup> Verification on Facebook includes a small symbol (checkmark) that is placed next to the agency name to indicate that the page is an official page administered by the department.



|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction Statement   | 7 (8.76%) |
| Administered by Department   | 6 (7.59%) |
| Content must adhere to all trademark, copyright, and service mark restrictions | 4 (5.06%) |
| Verified*  | 4 (5.06%) |

\* Variables not included in the model policy

### **Findings Concerning Content of Social Media Policies**

The second content analysis examined policies in an effort to answer the research question, to what extent do police departments and sheriffs' offices policies in Idaho adhere to the model social media policy put forth by the IACP? This content analysis consisted of a total of 20 policies that were sent to the researcher. The response rate for the requests for policies was 18.5 percent. Two departments responded by stating that they did not have a social media policy. Twelve of the policies sent in were directed towards employees' use of social media rather than the agency's. These policies were still included in the analysis, but many of them were not relevant to department use and thus many variables were not found in these policies. Eight of the variables in the model policy were not present in any of the policies analyzed. These variables, not found in any of the policies, include the following: inclusion of an introduction statement explaining the purpose of the department's social media presence, designing the page to target a specific audience, use of department computers to access social media is prohibited without permission, personnel use of personally owned devices to manage department's social media is prohibited, and four more addressing hiring techniques (See Table 8). The

most common variable (n=6) found in the analyzed policies was that of pages needing to be approved by the chief of the department or an executive.

**Table 8      Results – Social Media Policies Analysis**

| <b>Variable</b>   | <b>Number of Policies that include Variable</b> |
|---|---|
| Social Media page(s) approved be Chief or Executive                     | 6 (27.27%)                                      |
| Administered by Department (Information Services if in place)           | 4 (18.18%)                                      |
| Content Subject to Public Records laws                                  | 4 (18.18%)                                      |
| Posts will be monitored and can be removed                              | 4 (18.18%)                                      |
| Department Personnel Conduct  | 4 (18.18%)                                      |
| Social Media used as an investigative tool                              | 4 (18.18%)                                      |
| Social media used for community outreach and engagement                 | 4 (18.18%)                                      |
| Social media used to make time-sensitive notifications                  | 4 (18.18%)                                      |
| Content must Adhere to Policies, Laws, and Regulations                  | 3 (13.64%)                                      |
| Content managed, stored, and retrieved to comply with open records laws | 3 (13.64%)                                      |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Department Personnel –<br>No guilt or innocence statements   | 3 (13.64%) |
| Department Personnel –<br>No comments on pending cases   | 3 (13.64%) |
| Department Personnel –<br>No confidential information including<br>photographs or videos without<br>written permission | 3 (13.64%) |
| Department Personnel –<br>No political activities or private business  | 3 (13.64%) |
| Social Media used for recruitment  | 3 (13.64%) |
| Link to Department Website   | 2 (9.09%)  |
| Indicate the page is Maintained by<br>Department   | 2 (9.09%)  |
| Visitor Opinions do not Reflect<br>Department's  | 2 (9.09%)  |
| Content is Subject to Public Disclosure  | 2 (9.09%)  |
| Department Personnel<br>Identified as members of the department  | 2 (9.09%)  |
| Department Contact Information   | 1 (4.55%)  |
| Content must adhere to all trademark,<br>copyright, and service mark restrictions                                      | 1 (4.55%)  |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Department obligation to include Internet-based content in background investigations                                   | 1 (4.55%) |
| Search methods cannot violate existing law   | 1 (4.55%) |
| Every effort must be made to validate Internet-based information in hiring process                                     | 1 (4.55%) |
| Introduction Statement   | 0         |
| Designed For Target Audience   | 0         |
| Use of department computers to access social media without permission is prohibited                                    | 0         |
| Personnel use of personally owned devices to manage department's social media is prohibited without written permission | 0         |
| Searches of internet in hiring shall be conducted by a non-decision maker  | 0         |
| Protected class information shall be filtered out of background information  | 0         |
| Persons authorized to search Internet-based content are deemed as holding a sensitive position                         | 0         |
| Vetting techniques shall be applied uniformly  | 0         |

## **Bivariate Analysis**

### Police Departments vs. Sheriffs' Offices

The lack of variation in both samples brought about few meaningful results from the bivariate analyses. The content analysis of Facebook pages, however, showed a bit more variation than did the analysis of policies, possibly due to the larger sample size (N=79). Comparisons between police department's (n=49) and sheriffs' offices' (n=30) Facebook pages resulted in only one significant difference. In the analysis, only the variable of "including a statement that visitor's opinions do not reflect the departments" was found to be significant ( $\chi^2=5.450$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This relationship was weak though ( $\phi=0.263$ ). Only eight agencies included this variable and all eight were police departments.

### Agency Size

There were several significant differences found in the comparison based on agency size. The chi square results for these variables can be found in Table 9.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some expected values in the chi-square analysis were less than 5, and therefore the approximations of p may not be accurate.

**Table 9          Significant Facebook Page Variables based on Agency Size**

| <b>Variable</b>  | <b>Chi Square</b> | <b>Gamma Value</b> |
|--|-------------------|--------------------|
| Administered by Department   | 23.209*           | 0.875              |
| Indicate the page is Maintained by Department                                  | 14.782*           | 0.696              |
| Content must Adhere to Policies, Laws, and Regulations                         | 27.707*           | 0.743              |
| Visitor Opinions do not Reflect Department's                                   | 15.572*           | 0.694              |
| Content is Subject to Public Disclosure  | 28.333*           | 0.822              |
| Content must adhere to all trademark, copyright, and service mark restrictions | 19.562*           | 0.826              |

\*p&lt;0.05

The sample consisted of 56 small (<25 sworn officers) agencies, 15 medium (25-74 sworn officers) sized agencies, and 8 large (75+ sworn officers) agencies. In this comparison, it was found that four large departments indicated social media pages are “*administered* by the department or department information services”, while only one small and one medium sized department indicated this. This difference was found to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2=23.209$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and strong ( $\gamma=0.875$ ).

Large departments also were more likely to indicate pages are “*maintained* by the department specifically” ( $n=6$ ,  $\chi^2=14.782$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<0.05$ ,  $\gamma=0.696$ ). It should be noted that more small ( $n=5$ , 8.9%) and medium ( $n=3$ , 20%) departments included this variable than administration. More large departments indicate that “content is subject to applicable laws, regulations, and policies”, state that the “opinions expressed by visitors do not

reflect the departments”, state that “all content is subject to public disclosure” and state that “all content is subject to trademark, copyright and service mark restrictions”.

However, it should be noted that while all of these variables were found to be significant, the sample size was small, especially for those agencies falling into the large category (n=8).

Finally, when examining submitted policies based on agency type and agency size, no significant relationships were found. Very few of the policies that were submitted included the variables outlined in the IACP model social media policy. The small sample (N=20), along with very little variation among the submitted policies, likely contributed to the lack of significant findings in this analysis.

### **Summary of Findings**

The main questions examined in this study were: (1) How well is the IACP model policy reflected in departments’ actual social media pages? (2) To what extent do police departments and sheriffs’ office policies in Idaho adhere to the model social media policy as articulated by the IACP?

Overall, that the findings revealed that the Idaho social media policies currently in place may not adhere to the IACP’s model social media policy, especially in relation to the departmental use of social media. Idaho agencies seem to have enacted policies to cover the use of social media by their employees first, and not a policy focused on the department’s social media use. The majority (n=12) of the agencies only submitted an employee use of social media policy.

In addition, agency Facebook pages show a lack of adherence to the model social media policy put forth by the IACP. Many pages contain only the most basic information

in the form of at least a phone number (n=76) and a link to the department or city website (n=67). Many pages also included a mission statement (n=50), which is not required by the model social media policy.



## DISCUSSION

This study led to many valuable insights in relation to both of the research questions and highlighted multiple areas for potential future research. The Facebook page content analysis revealed what elements Idaho agencies are including on their pages, and what potentially vital pieces are missing. Most of the pages included three basic elements: a department contact, a link to a department webpage, and the department's mission statement. The inclusion of the department's mission statement is not something that was addressed in the IACP's model policy. It is hard to say why agencies in Idaho include their department mission statement, yet it could be considered an agency introduction to the page in a concise form. If a page is being used for recruitment purposes, the mission statement may allow potential recruits to assure that their own values align with the department's, or if the page is serving as a public relations tool (the most common use in Idaho as identified by Kabrud, 2014) the mission statement may serve as a way to connect with citizens.

The IACP suggests the inclusion of an introductory statement, outlining the purpose of the department's social media presence. While no policies submitted required an introduction statement, seven Facebook pages included an introduction statement. Another piece that was completely missing from the policies was any reference to designing social media page(s) for a target audience. Both of these variables fell under a section titled "Determine Strategy" in the model policy. If agencies wish to fully take advantage of the potential to form better relationships and involvement between the

community and the agency, as was suggested by Nobre and Silva (2014), the agency must have clear goals set in place. These goals will change how social media is managed by the department as well. If the department wishes to use social media for feedback, the pages must be monitored (Bain et al., 2014). Further research into how departments plan their social media presence and what types of strategies exist may help answer questions as to why these variables were not included in policies and were rarely reflected on the social media pages themselves.

While examining the Facebook pages, it was observed that page layout may not provide for an introduction statement. The seven introduction statements that were found were not on the main page, but rather under the “About” tab, which may not serve the purpose the IACP was trying to achieve. This part of the model policy is not explicitly explained, but generally, a statement of purpose is seen as a way to keep the page focused. This could be a vital part of the page if there is ever a question as to what is being posted on the page itself. Kabrud’s (2015) study brought to light how agency Facebook pages in Idaho are currently being used after, but Kabrud carefully analyzed each page to discover these uses. An introduction statement that clearly states the pages purpose would be much more user-friendly. Having a statement to refer back to as a guide may be a helpful tool for the page administrator, and potentially, the public. The missing introduction statements may provide the audience with a quick source to determine if the page is what individuals are looking for. As such, these statements may be more of a convenience to the audience.

Another potential benefit is the opportunity for a department to “verify” its page. If a page is “verified” by Facebook, a small checkmark appears next to the department

name on the department's main page and during a general search of Facebook. This checkmark is a sign telling Facebook users that Facebook has verified the identity of the person or group who created the page. Only four pages were verified, but it is difficult to say how much this verification really matters. Future research may need to explore how much weight the Facebook user places on verification. If it is found to be something a user looks for, it is highly suggested that a department get its page verified. The process of verification is very simple and involves completing a form and making a phone call. If this is found to be important, the ease of completing the verification would be worth it (Facebook, 2015).

The next two missing variables were found under the Department Sanctioned Use section of the model policy. The elements missing completely in the policies were the requirement that (1) department computers used by department personnel to access social media is prohibited without authorization, and (2) department personnel use of personally owned devices to manage the department's social media activities is prohibited without express written permission. These two variables are important in regards to security and control of the Facebook pages. The variable that was seen in even the most basic policies was the approval of postings by a chief or executive. Two departments that did not hold a policy specifically devoted to departmental use of social media stated that any social media posts must be approved by the chief or another executive. This variable is arguably the more important factor in controlling the department's social media, but this alone is not protection. Recall Jennings et al.'s (2014) statement that even a well-meaning employee can create a post with devastating effects. It is rather clear that departments in Idaho are concerned with having a main administration vein through which all publically

released information must travel, yet it is not clear what the true benefits of this strategy are.

An explanation for the missing variables could be the fact that the Facebook pages, especially in rural areas of Idaho, are administered by only one person who may also be the chief or main executive of the department. By having one person solely in charge of an agency's social media page(s), a department may eliminate the need for some of the variables, but this also opens the door to other potential problems that may not be addressed by the model policy. The model policy was developed as a guide for agencies of any size. The small, rural agencies commonly found in Idaho may find that these measures do not completely fit with their own departments' available resources, especially in newer areas, such as social media.

The other variables that were completely missing fell under the Potential Use variables section of the model policy. These variables may truly be completely missing from policy, or they may be included, but under separate policies that were not examined in this study. Two policies that were received included preliminary statements, which specified that investigation's use of social media, hiring use of social media, and personal use of social media were included under separate policy sections. As only the social media policy was requested, there is the potential that some variables may have been categorized differently in the departments' policy manuals and are thus missing from the collected data and subsequent analyses.

The majority of the policies submitted were designed to specifically address employee use of social media. It is unclear as to whether all of the agencies that submitted these policies also have in place a policy pertaining to departmental use of

social media. A few of the agencies were contacted by the researcher to see if this is the case; these agencies stated that they do not have anything more than the employee use policy currently in place. The need for employee use policies probably preceded that of the departmental policies. The employee use policies were likely put in place first because employees were maintaining their own social media pages before the department was and precautionary or possibly reactionary measures took place.

While these data are certainly not generalizable, the sample collected seems to point to the conclusion that there may be many departments without a current departmental social media use policy in place. While the policies submitted only represent about 18 percent of police agencies in Idaho, the Facebook pages examined represent approximately 71 percent of all agencies in Idaho. Many of the key elements from the IACP social media policy were not evident in this sample. These two analyses together further confirm the suspicion that there are not extensive department social media policies in place, or if there are, they are not being adhered to, or do not align with the IACP model policy. This could be attributed to the fact that the use of social media is still relatively new. Departments may not have fully realized the need for such a policy, or may potentially be in the process of drafting these policies.

Several events occurred during data collection that point to this being the case. One department put its departmental use of social media policy in place only a week prior to the commencement of data collection and another stated that the department is currently in the process of reviewing and approving a policy. The development of these policies is promising, but there are no indicators as to what is being used to guide the

development of social media policies. Some policies were drafted from a common source called Lexipol, and thus, contained similar material.

As such, an unexpected finding from this study is that many departments in Idaho contract out their social media policy making to the company Lexipol. Lexipol is a national company that provides “defensible policies” and an easy-to-use training platform, along with various resources, for public safety organizations in the U.S. (Lexipol, 2016, p. 1). Lexipol claims the benefits of partnering with their company include the following: reducing the number of claims and/or claim pay out amounts, assurance of up-to-date policies, creation of state-specific risk management policies, accessible reporting, and ease of use (Lexipol, 2016). Two departments submitted a policy, drafted with the assistance of Lexipol, which addressed departmental use of social media directly. These policies seemed to align nicely with the model policy and were only missing a few variables that may have been excluded due to the size of the department and the population the department serves. Lexipol is fertile ground for future research and provides a great opportunity for better understanding of policies and their development.

While there is no doubt that employee use of social media policies are important, *departmental* uses of social media policies are a vital component that Idaho police departments and sheriffs’ offices should consider adding to their policy manuals. The use of social media certainly has numerous benefits, but it also holds the potential for great harm if not used correctly or monitored proficiently. With over 70 percent of Idaho police organizations utilizing Facebook, the demand for such policies to be put in place and utilized is clearly quite high. Even in the most rural of counties, social media is

something that can provide direct communication and an open, constant flow of communication between the public and an agency if both parties are willing.

Suffice it to say, this study has shown that many police organizations in Idaho currently have Facebook pages that are not in compliance with the varied aspects of the IACP model policy. This study found that the beginnings of some acceptable departmental social media policies may be out there, but it seems as though Idaho departments may need to consider updating their policies to include departmental use as well as employee use. Social media is not something that likely will disappear in the coming years, but rather something that will continue to expand. While many Idaho police agencies have joined in on this growing trend, they may not have considered the potential consequences that come with its use. The IACP has provided an invaluable source in the creation of the model policy and Lexipol, the company many Idaho agencies contract with, also has a departmental social media policy available. With these sources, Idaho agencies are in a desirable position to update their current policies (and their current social media page(s)) to reflect the information that is presently lacking.

### **Limitations**

As with any social science endeavor, limitations exist. First, the response rate of this study is fairly low (18%). This response rate is not particularly surprising with this type of research though. The request for policies came at a potentially busy time for the agencies and was only sent out twice. While the request was sent through reputable associations, with backing, there is still possibility that this request was lost among other emails. The short amount of time provided for response also may have lowered the overall response rate. In relation to timing, the results of this study were dependent on the

time frame in which it took place. The “time-window” effect is an issue due to the fact that in the times before and after both the policies and Facebook pages were observed, change may have taken place. Policies could be updated and put in place, and perhaps even more quickly and seamlessly, Facebook pages could have been updated to reflect policies.

These content analyses do not answer the question of why an agency does not follow the IACP’s model policy. There are many possible reasons as to why an agency chooses not to follow the model policy, such as not seeing the need for a social media policy, not seeing how the model policy is relevant to problems specific to the agency, and contracting their policy out to a company such as Lexipol, who then determines what is in the policy. There also exists the possibility that agencies are unaware of the IACP model social media policy. This first attempt at a content analysis was limited by the number of agencies that were willing to submit their policy, and whether they submitted all of their relevant social media policies. Policies submitted and analyzed included email policies, employee social media use policies, and the relevant department use policies. The second content analysis is limited to the number of agencies that are actively utilizing a Facebook page, although as reported, a good number are.

### **Summary Recommendations**

The most obvious and overarching recommendation is that Idaho law enforcement agencies create a policy devoted to departmental use of social media. The large proportion of agencies that did not submit a social media policy when requested may indicate that they do not have one. The possible lack of departmental social media



policies in Idaho is concerning considering the potential misuse that comes with the practice of social media communication.

There also are many potential benefits that departments in Idaho may be missing out on by not utilizing social media pages. In the process of creating a departmental use of social media policy, departments need to define their goals for using of social media. Social media provides the potential for agencies to achieve many different goals, but in order to accomplish them, the goals should be clearly articulated (IACP, 2010). Kabrud's (2015) analysis of social media pages utilized by law enforcement agencies in Idaho suggested that the majority of pages are being used as a form of community relations with the public's interest in mind. If this is the true goal of Idaho agencies' use of social media, this should be reflected in the policies that are created.

The IACP model policy provides a great starting point and can be adapted to fit Idaho's needs. If an agency is contracting with Lexipol, it should request a social media policy that addresses the departmental issues that are currently not covered. Policies need to include specifics on who, where, and when access to the department's social media pages can take place. This most noticeable missing component from policies is a severe security issue. Policies created with the guidelines set forth by the IACP would be all encompassing and easily defensible due to the careful consideration that was put into the creation of the model policy (IACP, 2010).

After the policies are created, agencies will need to update all of their social media pages and sites to comply with the newly created policy. This process may be time consuming at first, but after the initial overhaul, the social media sites would simply resume normal operations and resource consumption. The major elements that are

currently missing from the pages are elements that can be added in a “terms of use” or “information” section. These items include, “stating that opinions posted by visitors do not reflect the department’s opinions” and “indicating the page is maintained by the department” (IACP, 2010). Once these variables are drafted into a policy, the addition of the variables onto the actual pages should be a fairly simple process.

## CONCLUSION

Police agencies are continuously evolving to respond to the public they are a part of and serve. The use of social media has brought new challenges for policing, but it also provides many valuable opportunities. This study highlighted the lack of departmental social media policies in the State of Idaho and provided recommendations on how to create a safer and more productive social media presence. The use of social media by police agencies is something that likely will not diminish in the coming years due to the continual growth of technology and in types of social media that appeal to different groups of people. Idaho agencies are clearly involved in this form of communication (Kabrud, 2015) and should have the policies in place to guide their use. The topic of social media use and policies in policing provides a wealth of potential research areas due to the fact that it is still a fairly unfamiliar field. As the social media world continues to change and enthrall members of the public, so too will policing and its use of this communication medium. The public social sphere is shifting to a virtual world along with a corresponding shift in focus for many police departments. This complex environment and relationship will likely produce more changes in the future and bring to light further areas for research and policy development.

Future research concerning law enforcement and social media policies should explore what motivates law enforcement to use social media, and whether policies are reinforcing these goals, how social media policies are being implemented, and whether appropriate training is taking place. Additional research should examine how policies are

being enforced in relation to different social media platforms. Future research on policing and social media policies should explore the outsourcing of social media policies, the sources of information these companies are using to create policy, and how/if outsourced policies can be tailored to fit the departments they are contracted by. The topic of policy development should be further explored by observing how many policies are in development and whether the IACP model policy is taken into consideration during development.

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